

The Internet and the Commercialization of Sex: A Gender Perspective.

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the unique role of the Internet in the spread of pornography and links it with violence against women. Continuous efforts at tackling this problem, for example, through the policing of the Internet are also discussed.

Key words: The Internet, pornography and violence against women

Recent technological advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have resulted in the emergence of many new forms of media such as videotapes, DVDs. Of all these forms of new media, the Internet is considered the most addictive medium after television. In the United States, for example, this is the case for a large proportion of the 160 million users of the medium (Rishad Tobaccowala to Robin Hafitz, 13 January 2003). In China, the most populous country in the world, the country's online population has grown rapidly that it is now the second largest Internet Market in the world after the United States (Independent Online Newspaper [heretofore IOL], 28 May 2005; REUTERS, 22 July 2005).

Furthermore, there is the recognition that the positive aspects of the Internet are many and that women have also benefited from these developments. For example, the Internet has been empowering for women by bringing employment gains to them. According to the United Nations (UN Fact Sheet No. 10, January 2002), increasing numbers of women have gained access to computer technology particularly in countries where access to computers is available. For example, from 1995 to 1998, women's online engagements were estimated to have increased from 8.1 to 30.1 million globally, and were expected to reach 43.3 million in 2000. The development of electronic mail has also allowed women to disseminate information in a faster and less expensive way, enabling them to network, organize and mobilize more effectively. Furthermore, the Internet can be used in a way to leverage issues and try to generate change. For example, one of its unique aspects is

shown in how easy it would be for law enforcement agencies to track down traffickers such as through their credit card information. Despite these positive aspects of the Internet, it has also brought many problems such as exacerbating the commercialization of sex – and the spread of pornography (del Nevo 2000).

Catharine MacKinnon defines pornography as:

The graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words that also include women dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities, enjoying pain or humiliation or rape, being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt, in postures of sexual submission or severity or display, reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes conditions sexual” (cited in Jennifer Nash, 2002).

The past century witnessed a sale on flesh unequal in history. Worldwide, there has been a widespread increase of pornographic and wanton violence in the media. Books and magazines, recordings, the cinema, the theater, television, videocassettes, advertising displays and even telecommunications, frequently offer a representation of violent behavior or of permissiveness in sexual activity (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Vatican City, 7 May, 1982, 23rd World Communications Day). Internet advertising, for example, is growing bigger by the day and the medium is increasing the opportunities for pornography greatly.

In its 11th May 2005 Report on sex trade’s reliance on forced labor, the International Labor Organization noted, that technological developments such as the Internet, as well as the proliferation of tourism, escort agencies, human trafficking, pornography, and media outlets that advertise sexual services, have contributed to the growing demand for commercial sex.

The commercialization of vice has always thrived on women's bodies, from skimpily clad cocktail waitresses to the iconic images of showgirls. As Indhu Rajagopal with Nis Bojin (2004) point out, with "increasing potential for dissemination of pornographic materials, the Internet has become a powerful purveyor of prurient pictures and messages. In this process, the voyeur becomes at once a prying observer and also a participant in actively degrading human beings, particularly through the commodification of women and children."

Reflecting on this problem James Atlas (*Sunday Times Lifestyle* [South Africa], 30 May 2000, p. 20) observed earlier on, that pornography used to be a preserve of sleazy shops but by the end of the last millennium, it became embraced in the respected halls of academia. (For more on pornography and the politics of gender see Judith Butler 1993, Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2). Its mainstreaming can be traced to the market-led nature of the media. The link between pornography and advertising is also becoming increasingly blurred. References to obscenity and indecency cited in many codes of conduct or self-regulatory guidelines are no longer applicable, as pornographic images can be downloaded from the Internet at the click of a mouse (del Nevo 2000).

Moreover, Internet sites often result in increased percentage of violent, misogynistic images. Virtual violence is readily available on the Internet and the Danish-licensed website: <http://www.slavefarm.com> is a classic example of web sites that promote violence against women.

Feminists analyzing women and media issues argue that pornography thrives on violence against women. They describe it as oppression against women. While feminists such as

Wendy McElroy 1993 and Nadine Strossen (1995), for example, view pornography as an expression of a woman's right, Zillah Eisenstein (in her 1998 book titled: *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Lure of Cyber fantasy*) seems to attack it. Katrien Jacobs (2000) has however criticized Eisenstein's book for not giving a critical analysis of Internet pornography and cybersex but instead focusing on "a raw and angry book, a passionate attack against American capitalism, the Clinton administration, privatized telecommunications and Internet companies that manufacture 'global obscenities.'" Jacobs therefore concludes that Eisenstein's book does not cover pornography as mediated sexual scenes. Contrarily, other feminist critics of pornography such as Catherine Mackinnon (1982; 1993) and Diana Russell (1995) assert that pornography glamorizes and incites violence against women and children. Not all pornography glamorizes violence.

Pornography comes in different forms and some of these are not necessarily aggressive. Magazines such as playboy and Penthouse are not always aggressive in their approach. They just combine sensational stories about crime with "soft-core" porn. Other forms of pornography include cartoons, comics, joke books, sensational newspapers and political satire. These forms of pornography differ from that of the sex industry in particular. In contrast, the sex industry's major focus seems to be on "sex" alone whilst at the same time being insensitive to the negative consequences associated with its aggressive pornography—a pornography which portrays violent sexual acts (such as rape and murder) particularly against women, and children. This is a problem exacerbated by the Internet.

It has been problematic linking violence in the Internet (or the media in general) to violence against women. The Report of the United States Attorney General Commission on Pornography (Section 5.2.1 Sexually Violent Material) however links violence against women to the consumption of pornography (MacKinnon cited in Nash 2002). This report is supported by the Kriegel Commission report (November 2002) set up by the French government to look into the broadcasting standards of violent or pornographic images. This report also found that there is a link between the broadcast of violent scenes and the behavior of young people. According to the Kriegel report (IOL, 14 November 2002), the short-term emotional effects of exposure to televised violence are reactions of fear, anxiety and distress. According to the article, the report states that on pornography: “The visual representation in a brutal or repeated fashion of pornographic scenes at too young an age can create an emotion capable of influencing the normal development of the brain and leaving a lasting imprint on a person’s conception of sexuality” (IOL, 14 November 2002).

The negative effects of pornography are many. It is not difficult to conceptualize the possibility that in instances of prolonged exposure, certain dubious elements of the pseudo-sexuality may become integrated within the perceptual framework of some receivers. The main issue regarding pornography is according to Andre van Deventer (1995: 5-6), not the short- term and perceivable behavioral effects on the individual as such, whether positive or negative, but rather on the long-term affective and cognitive effects on the development of mass culture – such as violence against women – (*emphasis mine*).

There have also been calls for a tougher stand on indecency, for example, censorship defined, as any means by which ideas and works of art that express views not in accord with the dominant ideology are prevented from reaching their intended audience (Tax et al. 2003). Such works may be seized, banned, ignored, defamed, diminished, or misinterpreted. Feminists consider censorship as a form of the exercise of power such as based on gender, class or nation. It is, therefore, seen as one of the most effective means of repressive patriarchal structures within society and the home. Apart from this reason, the question of whether something is pornography or not has also been debatable in the sense that some consider it as art.

In gender terms, various artists have for ages painted pictures of women, especially in the nude. This nudity is however examined in terms of the shape, beauty and the texture of the female form. Some of these arts are also meant to be overtly sexual but not necessarily pornographic -- erotic art. Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863-65, Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France), and Dominique Ingre's *Grande Odalisque* (1814, Musee du Louvre [III], also in France) respectively are good examples.

On a different level, the *Kama Sutra*, an ancient Indian text of erotic love, believed to have been written sometime in the third century by a sage known as Vatsyayana, depicts figures of loving couples in various sexual forms. The popularity of the original translation of this text in Great Britain by Sir Richard Burton (in 1876) was associated by what was termed at the time, as Hindu pornography. Moreover, the translated text seemed to express all things in terms of the patriarchal/male-dominated perspective. The current translation of the text by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar and known, as *Kamasutra*

offers a more gender-balanced version. It analyzes its attitudes toward gender and sexual violence, offers mutuality between men and women, and sets it in the context of ancient Indian social theory, scientific method, and sexual ethics (Sensua Organics 2005).

The general observation that the lines between what is considered art, erotic art and pornography seem to be less rigid in the art world. In erotic art, however, the object of desire is a recognizable human individual – the subject (person in the art) - examined not in terms of exciting titillation. In pornography, the opposite seems to be the case. The main occupation is with the sex act alone. With women mostly presented as objects of sexual desire, pornography can, therefore, rightly be accused of objectifying them and consequently exposing them to gender-based violence.

Violence against women is a simple phrase that encompasses a horrifying list of abusive behavior both physically and psychologically that ranges from violence in the home, sexual harassment at school and work, rape and defilement, sexual violence including conflict situations, and enforcement of gender-bias laws. From the above list, one cannot but reflect on the ways and means by which the international community and domestic laws can address this serious problem of gender injustice. Some countries are currently making efforts to combat this menace. The police in the United Kingdom are, for example, contacting other forces worldwide in an attempt to close down websites with sexually violent content (BBC News, 2 May 2004 located at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/uk_news/3460855.stm).

Recently, China is also initiating moves to police Chinese-run websites including commercial, government and personal sites (Elaine Kurtenbach, IOL, 7 June 2005). In 2004, for example, the country shut down 12 000 Internet Cafes. The reasons for these

moves are many. While some of the cafes were closed because of the lack of registration others were closed because they allowed access to unethical, illegal and inhumane pornography.

These efforts, though commendable, have fallen short of what is needed as further calls for the increase in the use of software that restricts what is sent to people via the Internet (censor ware) has also been met with serious but mixed concerns. As Katrien Jacobs clearly puts it: “Pornography as sexually explicit electronic traffic and a bubbling entertainment industry has pervaded the Internet from its very infancy, and is now causing fear and headaches amongst citizens and rightwing organizations. While porn consumers are frantically buying access to state-of-the-art sites, the unwieldy empire of the senses is stirring up new modes of chaotic conservatism and censorship legislation” (Jacobs 2000). Censoring what can be seen over the Internet can be limiting.

Individuality is supreme in this regard. Feminists Against Censorship such as Carol Avedon (1993) assert that censorship will not reduce crime. A submission by Feminists Against Censorship to the [UK] Home Affairs Inquiry into Computer Pornography (1994), also emphasizes that research into the background and behavior of serious sex offenders has revealed that the causes of abusive/violent behavior are found in early childhood and generally pre-date exposure to pornographic materials. Moreover, most of the debate concerning the Internet has focused on commercial sites but the Internet has more than one set of consequences. Other sources of sexual material also abound. These include person-to-person file exchanges, unsolicited e-mail, Web cameras and chat rooms (Roussouw 2002).

The Internet is a public place. It will therefore be counterproductive to rely on absolutist views and approaches to the above problems. Any attempt at blocking programmes by law enforcement can be circumvented. Over-reliance solely on a particular method can only lead to a false sense of security.

A critical tool in addressing these problems is systematic research on gender on the Internet. This will help to put pressure on governments (and even on a global level) to start taking gender seriously. Similar research will also be required in order to raise consciousness about the issues, as well as effectively monitor progress in the future.

Conclusion

Women's bodies are the most popular playthings in famous international amusement/entertainment strips such as Las Vegas, as strippers adorn the glitzy postmodern spectacle that they provide. No country is immune to this problem. While formulating and applying ethical codes for the communications media, might go a long way in promoting respect and common good, particularly for the Internet which beams homogeneous images around the world, confronting the negative effects of the Internet on women requires focusing not exclusively on violence but on the entire spectrum of media representations that limit, demean or degrade women.

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